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REMIX AS EDUCATIONAL ACTIVITY

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INTRODUCTION

My initiation into remix was at a language education workshop when I was asked to create a poem by combining lines of Lord Byron and lyrics of Joe Cocker. The act of remix is popularly associated with music producers, visual artists, and YouTube creators who take material from various sources to create original work, but it can also be a powerful tool for educators. Cultural and legal scholar Lawrence Lessig claims that remix is a vital skill and mindset for art, commerce, and education (2008). The skills in remix can also be a key to employment and prosperity for the future (Friedman, 2008). Using remix in our student-centered projects can be a tool for our students' intellectual, cultural, and ethical development.

What is Remix?

Popular examples of remix today come from professional and amateur media. Remix is an integral part of hip hop music, though the analog appropriation of riffs, chords, and melodies runs throughout musical history. One of the most salient examples of remix in music is Jay Z's "Hard Knock Life (Ghetto Anthem)"(1998) where he appropriates lyrics and audio samples from the song "It's the Hard Knock Life" from the 1977 musical *Annie* (Strouse, Meehan, & Charnin, 1977). The song won a 1999 Grammy and was awarded platinum status by the Recording Industry Association of America in 2015.

A popular, contemporary example of remix in visual arts is Shepard Fairey's *Hope* poster. This work took Associated Press photographer Mannie Garcia's 2006 image of Barak Obama, recast it in a style inspired by early Soviet propaganda, and printed "Hope" at the bottom. This remixed image is not only iconic, but the nature of the source material and the dispute over its fair use led to a two-year legal battle between Fairey and Garcia (Kravets, 2011).

Arguably, remix has had a bigger cultural impact on amateur or "user-created" content. The availability of media content as well as the accessibility of media editing tools have given non-professionals new avenues of creativity. Major remix genres of fan homage, political satire, and recut movie trailers are illustrative of the communities and practices of amateur remix. So much

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so that remix has been considered the folk art of the 21st century (Lessig, 2009; Egenes, 2010).

Fans of movies and TV programs express their affection for actors and characters by selecting clips from different shows and then setting the montage to music. Though the subjects vary among the characters in popular culture, a few interesting examples are Max Associates' "Bruce Lee: Be Like Water: Inspirations" (2013), Racket's "Negan's Song (The Walking Dead Remix)" (2016), and Marcauniel42 "Wonder Woman Tribute – Centuries" (2017). In all of these videos fans select "greatest moments" from the available footage and arrange them to music to create an original work, typically an homage to the character or actor.

Remix is a popular medium for political satire. Siegharuto's 2005 "Bush Blair Endless Love" satirized the relationship of George Bush and Tony Blair and was one of the first prominent political satires to debut on YouTube. The video superimposes the song "Endless Love" over news footage of Bush and Blair and creates the illusion of a duet between the two leaders. A more contemporary example of remix for political satire is the Friend Dog Studio's 2015 "Your Drunk Neighbor Donald Trump." This popular video series features a character drinking a beer on a porch with a sleeveless American flag shirt seamlessly mouthing audio clips from Trump speeches.

Another amateur genre worth noting is the recut trailer. These are parodies in which the content from a popular movie is re-organized to create a coming attraction for a movie with a theme or tone antithetical to the original. For example, "Shining" recasts *The Shining* (Kubrick, 1980) as a Romantic Comedy (Ryang, 2006) and "Scary Mary" (Moviemaker, 2006) reimagines *Mary Poppins* (Stevenson, 1964) as a horror film. Remix gives fans, citizens, hobbyists, and satirists the ability to creatively repurpose, highlight, and subvert popular content.

However, the process of taking cultural artifacts and combining them into new kinds of creative blends is an old human activity. We now do digitally and globally what had previously taken decades or centuries to do. The transfer, appropriation, and hybridization of cultural artifacts are as old as culture itself. Cooking, art, literature, music, design, and engineering can be seen through the lens of remix.

EDUCATIONAL APPLICATIONS

My introduction to remix as an educational activity was not digital, but based on a tradition that was more than 2000 years old. In the mid-1990s I was a high school English teacher taking a workshop on teaching poetry given by Louisa Newlin of the Folger Shakespeare Library. She was showing participants how to bring students into the themes, moods, and tones of complex poetry by combining lines and phrases of various works. The technique itself was based on the genre of cento poetry. From the Latin word "patchwork," cento poetry was practiced by Virgil and Homer and is still a form practiced by contemporary poets (American Academy of Poets, 2014). We were given several poems from the Romantic Period and the texts of popular songs and nursery rhymes and asked to write a cento poem of five lines that contained about half a work from each set. Here's my cento from that workshop—a mashup of Byron's "She Walks in Beauty" with Joe Cocker's "When the Night Comes".

"She Walks When the Night Comes"

She walks in beauty, when the night comes,
Of cloudless climes and starry skies.
I'll be back for you.
And all that's best of dark and bright
Weighs me down with memories.

This workshop was the first time I felt the creative and educational benefits of mixing other people's work into new kinds of creative blends.

I grew to realize that there were broader educational benefits from this practice and that digital media would open up new avenues for creativity and learning. Lawrence Lessig's *Remix: Making Art and Commerce Thrive in the Hybrid Economy* (2009) is one of the first popular works that addressed the phenomenon of remix. Lessig makes a case for remix in education for its ability to connect to students' interests, teach media literacy, and actively engage students in culture (pp. 79-80). When students are taking apart and recombining media, they are getting under the hood of our culture. In an interview with Daniel Pink, Thomas Friedman goes further in describing the importance of the skill of "integration," especially of seemingly diverse topics (n.d.). In discussing education and employment, Friedman connects the importance of liberal arts, technology, and a nimble approach to combining previously uncombined elements. Friedman tells Pink:

> If schools can actually produce people who are good synthesizers, they're going to be more effective and innovative workers...[Kids] get mash-ups. They do it naturally. And today, he who mashes best will mash most and be wealthiest (Pink, n.d).

Remix can be a useful educational tool with implications for the future of citizenship and work—for now and for the future.

Remix is a helpful entry point and corollary to research. The transformative nature of good remix, the ability to take the material of others and to truly make something original,

correlates to the process and struggles of research. Remix gets students to feel the issues of originality and creativity. I have often discussed research with students, and I can almost imagine a cartoon thought bubble above their heads—"Very smart people have written about this already. What can I add to their work?" Remix is a good entry point into this seeming paradox of creating an original work based on the thoughts, ideas, citations, and quotes of others.

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Also, remix applies the technique of creative constraints, a creative and productivity tool with growing prominence in a variety of fields. The term "creative constraints" describes the almost contradictory situation that we can be more creative with less material, and that innovation and creativity can be fostered with limits (Lehrer, 2011). Ask a person to "be creative" with a blank piece of paper and they may be unable to produce much or be hesitant to start. However, give someone six Legos, three crayons, or a limit of 17 syllables, and you'll get something. Successes of online phenomenon such as Six Word Stories (www.sixwordstories.net), where authors are challenged to create a narrative in six words, and Post Secret (postsecret.com), where people share intimate details of their lives on a single postcard, attest to the allure of constraints. Creative constraint is a fundamental principle of various arts when artists or writers limit themselves to a particular genre, style, medium or form. It is also applied in management (May, 2013), is used as a tool for architects and award-winning professionals (Sturt, 2013), and there is a growing body of research on its effectiveness in psychological and social research (Lehrer, 2011). Students can feel the creative power of working with constraints when limited to "remixing" material from a particular set of materials or blending in content from a specific work.

EDUCATIONAL EXAMPLES

One remix-based activity I developed to teach the technology of audio editing as well as some of its educational benefits is the "Six Sounds Project." Students are challenged to create a one-minute audio story that includes six sounds: an engine roar, a cricket chirp, a splash, a match strike, a phone ring, and a beating heart. They are given a link to free audio editing software, the audio files, and simple technical instructions. Students from grades four to graduate school have used the same six sounds to create crime dramas, camping stories, and screwball comedies (Shamburg, n.d.).

A popular medium of remix as well as remix in education is machinima, which is the use of a video game to create a movie. The word "machinima" is a combination of the words "machine" and "cinema," with "machine" referring to the game engine that runs the game. Machinima creators video-record the characters of a game as they "act" in the game's virtual world. The elements of the game are repurposed as the background, props, and virtual "puppets" in an original movie. The birth of machinima can be traced back to the mid 1990s when video gamers began to create original stories and share them (Strickland, 2007). Machinima is now formally taught in computer science programs (Utah College of Engineering, 2008) and has numerous film festivals internationally. Importantly, machinima is a powerful and accessible medium for students to create and share. A search on YouTube for "Machinima School project" yields over 70,000 results (October, 1, 2017)—from "The Death of Achilles" (Paden260, 2011) to a school science project on Titanium (Cncfan, 2009). A quick perusal of the video descriptions reveals that many of these clips were student responses to open-ended class project assignments.

A popular idea in education is the mock movie "trailer," a concise and often witty parody of a coming attraction for a hypothetical movie. The trailers take bits of amateur student action footage and mix them with actual movie footage and images of actors from various sources. Though there is educational material and lesson plans to guide students in creating mock trailers (Bass, 2013; Kajder, 2008), I've found that any teacher or student who has spent a minimal amount of time in front of the TV can usually pull it off. However, a reflection or discussion on the conventions and types of trailers can be helpful. A YouTube search for "student trailer projects" on any canonical work or young adult book—from *To Kill a Mockingbird* to *I Am Malala*—will yield numerous results.

Remix does not have to be digital to be an effective tool. Activities such as cento poetry can be effective in Language arts and English classes. Performance and primary sources have been used in remix-related activities. Students have arranged and performed readings and responses from novels and primary sources in the spirit of Anna Deavere Smith and verbatim theater in social studies and history classes (Gordon, 2001). Teachers can apply the techniques of fanfiction to novels, short stories, and historical events, challenging students to create missing scenes, cross-pollinating characters from different stories, or inserting themselves into the plots (Shamburg 2012, 2008). In fanfiction as well as practices in out-of-school activities, writers are re-casting and recombining the characters, settings and plots of books, movies, and historical events that interest them. One important consideration when using out-of-school practices such as machinima, verbatim theater, and fanfiction is to not simply co-opt the activities but to understand and respect the original communities and practices.

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

There are important ethical considerations when using remix in educational activities. First, the ease of taking the material of others and using them opens up opportunities for conver-

sations about intellectual property rights. The most productive is the balance of Fair Use—the legal principle that allows people to use the copyrighted material of others without permission. When claiming fair use, one critical factor is "transformational use." This is the central question of whether new meanings are generated from the reused material. Working with teachers and students, confusion about copyright seems to be one of the biggest hindrances to using media and technology in creative ways. I use and recommend the book *Copyright Clarity* (Hobbs, 2010) for educators who have an interest in media creation, remix, and fair use in their classrooms. This is a nuanced and empowering look at the issues of fair use in education.

Another ethical consideration is the history and abuses of cultural appropriation. Cultural appropriation has served predatory and colonial systems throughout history. A use of remix in education needs to address power dynamics and ethical issues of taking ideas and artifacts from one culture and repurposing them. I will often begin this conversation with students with a rhetorical question—"If you wanted to use Buddhist chanting as the background to a project, would this be disrespectful?" Conversely, remix is often used for satire and parody, which is intentionally irreverent (Silva & Garcia, 2012). Remembering the quip often attributed to Oscar Wilde that, "A gentleman is a person who never gives offense unintentionally," can be a useful guide to burgeoning remixers and satirists.

CONCLUSION

I've found remix to be a powerful lens to use both personally and professionally. I hope I have done it some justice in describing remix as a lens through which it can be used to re-envision artistic work, culture, and as a tool for teaching.

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